

You Must Remember This: Obituaries and the Civil Rights Movement

Journal of Black Studies

44(4) 335–355

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0021934713482465

jbs.sagepub.com



Kathleen McElroy¹

Abstract

This study demonstrates how reporter-written obituaries of Black civil rights movement leaders reinforce a limited, facile view of the African American freedom struggle that haunts even today's race relations. The obituaries remember a movement that Julian Bond characterized as "a morality play" of "Black saints" against "southern White sinners." What these articles remember—and in some cases forget—is critical because collective memory research shows that obituaries reflect what the present thinks of the past. Five nostalgic, racialized frames emerge from these obituaries: (a) the importance of violence inflicted on Blacks, (b) the importance of the dutiful suffering endured by Blacks, (c) news media's documentation of White southern oppression, (d) the salience and valence of the early-1960s Martin Luther King Jr., and (e) the idealism of integration over Black nationalist goals.

Keywords

news media, obituaries, civil rights movement, framing theory, collective memory

Present-day obituaries about civil rights newsmakers report more than their deaths and achievements; they also convey what is important about the

¹University of Texas, Austin, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:

Kathleen McElroy, School of Journalism, University of Texas, BMC Room 3.338, 300 W. Dean Keeton, Austin, TX 78712-1073, USA.

Email: kathleenmcelroy@utexas.edu

African American freedom struggle. Far more regularly than the coverage of the King holiday, the deaths of prominent rights leaders afford the news media an opportunity to write nostalgically about a movement they had championed in the mid-1950s and 1960s (Morgan, 2006; Rhodes, 2007; Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). Yet scholars in African American history contend that civil rights movement discourse, especially from the news media, is restricted and simplified (Baker, 1994; Hall, 2005; Morgan, 2006; Rhodes, 2007; Romano & Raiford, 2006; Ward, 2001).

Through the theoretical lens of framing and collective memory, this study examines what contemporary obituaries remember about the civil rights movement. A textual analysis of reporter-written obituaries for five African American rights activists who died between 1999 and 2008 reveals that the journalists still prefer to see the movement through narratives that permeated the mainstream news media in the 1950s and early 1960s and continue their stranglehold on African American discourse today (Hall, 2005; Morgan, 2006). These obituaries reduce the complex, multidimensional history of the civil rights movement to five racialized frames: (a) the importance of violence inflicted on Blacks, (b) the importance of the dutiful suffering endured by Blacks, (c) the news media's documentation of southern White oppression, (d) the salience and valence of the early-1960s Martin Luther King Jr., and (e) the idealism of integration over Black nationalist goals. Anecdotes, quotations, and exposition emphasize scenes or specters of violence—and the leaders' passive response to them—and make them as culturally important to the movement as any legislative redress it sought.

Even while identifying the salient themes in today's obituaries, this study in no way downplays the significance of violence during the civil rights movement, or the courage of those who risked their lives and livelihood for freedom. But this analysis is significant because the civil rights movement maintains a central and sometimes contentious place in American discourse (Hall, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2007; Romano & Raiford, 2006). In 2011, the Southern Poverty Law Center denounced the way that states were teaching students about the civil rights movement. A few months later, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, in opposing same-sex marriage legislation, was criticized for remarking, "The fact of the matter is, I think people would have been happy to have a referendum on civil rights rather than fighting and dying in the streets in the South" (Dopp, 2012).

"The past isn't dead and buried," Barack Obama, quoting William Faulkner, said during his campaign speech on race in March 2008. "In fact, it isn't even past." This study analyzes which "past" remains present in civil rights movement obituaries.

The Civil Rights Movement and Journalism

The news media's role in the success of the early civil rights movement is well documented, including John Lewis's oft-repeated assertion that journalism was the movement's wind beneath its wings (Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). Press fascination with race and the South began with the Emmett Till murder case and trial in 1955, which "pushed the mainstream press to move beyond the relatively safe terrain of a Supreme Court decision to consider the violent underbelly of racism" (Rhodes, 2007, p. 45).

The presence of cameras and journalists often prevented violence toward rights protesters (Branch, 1988; Payne, 2007; Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). But "white journalists and news consumers proved overwhelmingly concerned with the possibilities of violence inherent in nonviolent protests" (Jackson, 2007, p. 7). The sympathetic news media made arrest counts, beatings, incarceration, and the specter of violence more salient than the strategy actually at work (Bond, 2001; Von Hoffman, 1964). The movement emerged as a "definable and marketable subject"—fulfilling media's obligation to serve the public—but with "selection and framing" still at work (Rhodes, 2007, p. 51). In the mid-1960s, coverage changed when the movement spread beyond the South and sought demands beyond simple accommodation; it entered a stage in which civil rights activities were less newsworthy while interracial conflict and Black internal factionalism generated headlines (Bond, 2001; King, 1969).

Today's collective civil rights memory is attacked on two related fronts. Morgan (2006) complains that mass media's "public memory draws heavily on the very stories, events, and personalities that prevailed in past media accounts" (p. 139). The result, Ward (2001) contends, is a movement represented in "simple parables of good and evil, unequivocal rights and incontrovertible wrongs, unimpeachable heroes and unspeakable villains" (p. 9), ignoring scholarship since the 1980s that demonstrates otherwise.

Collective Memory, Framing, and Obituaries

Reporter-written obituaries (as opposed to paid notices) often start with archived clips and are written in advance for prominent, aged newsmakers like Rosa Parks. Because obituaries reveal what a society considers worth remembering (Fowler, 2007; Hume, 2000; Kitch & Hume, 2008; Starck, 2006), readers gravitate toward them as mementos, homages, and social connections (Bates, Monroe, & Zuang, 2009; Bytheway & Johnson, 1996; Fowler, 2007; Hume & Bressers, 2009; Starck, 2006). Much research focuses on who is deemed worthy of an obituary (Bytheway & Johnson, 1996;

Fowler, 2007; Fowler & Bielsa, 2007; Starck, 2006). But Hume (2000) notes obituaries legitimize something “more abstract than mere facts” by reporting the values deemed noteworthy in the deceased and by serving as “a representation of an ideal, with its own distinct contribution to history” (p. 14).

Thus, obituaries are crucial sites of collective memory, which Halbwachs (1992) identified as the memory’s reconstruction of an image that corresponds with the “predominant thoughts of the society” (p. 40). Groups “provide individuals with frameworks” within which memories are localized by a “kind of mapping” (Connerton, 1989, p. 37). Obituaries are “useful scaffolding” for studying collective memory (Fowler & Bielsa, 2007, p. 204). Paired with collective memory, they combine “past and present, public and private” (Hume, 2000, p. 15).

Collective memory and framing are complementary. Lippman’s (1922) “pictures in our heads,” which help us make sense of and organize our worlds, were refined into Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis. Even though framing has been assigned different meanings and concepts (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999), at their simplest frames “are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, 2001, p. 11). Furthermore, Hertog and McLeod (2001) stress that frames are a cultural rather than cognitive phenomenon that structures our world by (a) determining which content is relevant; (b) defining the roles that individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions play; (c) outlining how various beliefs and values and actions are related; (d) influencing symbolic representation of topics, including language use; and (e) outlining the values and goals inherent in the structuring of a content area. This worldview perspective makes obituary frames particularly meaningful.

Research in collective memory and news media (Edy, 2006; Kitch & Hume, 2008; Simonetti, 2008) has employed Entman’s (1993) four-part framing definition so that texts are analyzed as narratives to be examined for the values and morals they contain:

Frames then *define problems*—determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; *diagnose causes*—identify the forces creating the problem; *make moral judgments*—evaluate causing agents and their effects; and *suggest remedies*—offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects. (p. 52, italics original)

For example, Simonetti (2008), in studying framing, collective memory, and civil rights, used the definition as a template to conclude that present-day coverage of the 1967 Milwaukee riots used a “problems persist” frame. This

study also employs the definition to pinpoint the broader cultural role of the themes employed in civil rights obituaries.

Method

This research examines obituary texts through narrative analysis, a proven methodology in the field of memory and media and its relationship to framing (Edy, 2006; Hume & Arceneaux, 2008; Simonetti, 2008). Kitch (2007) explains that narrative analysis searches for the “common thematic and structural choices” made by reporters and editors:

Such a study considers not just each story’s individual content and structure, but also (indeed, more importantly) recurring characters and subplots across all evidence. It further attempts to understand the connotative as well as denotative meanings of language and imagery—what is suggested generally about culture, as well as what is literally depicted with regard to the news subject. (p. 118)

Therefore obituaries are ideal for exploring narratives because “the facts, the names, and details change almost daily, but the framework into which they fit—the symbolic system—is more enduring” (Bird & Dardenne, 1988, p. 69). Obituary writers relish “making people come alive, as it were, through the use of narrative tension, rich detail and colorful anecdote,” according to *New York Times* obituary editor William McDonald (Baranauckas, 2006).¹

The units of analysis are reporter-written obituaries published since 1999, as the King holiday became firmly established and scholarship about the movement emerged. Through library databases and individual publication search engines for such words as “Civil Rights,” “Civil Rights Movement,” “black,” “African-American,” and “rights” in the text and headlines, about 150 civil rights newsmakers were initially examined to contextually understand this kind of obituary. Certain figures were then eliminated because of their race or because their fame was rooted in violence or in being related to a newsmaker; thus William Sloane Coffin, Coretta Scott King, and Mamie Till-Mobley were excluded. The five analyzed for this study are prototypical civil rights obituary subjects: the iconic Rosa Parks; Little Rock Nine leader Daisy Bates; James Farmer, the last of the Big Four rights leaders and based in the North; singer Odetta; and artist/activist Ossie Davis.

Each newsmaker received an obituary from at least four of these organizations: *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *USA Today*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Montgomery Advertiser*, and the Associated Press wire service (AP). Included for local

perspective were the *Detroit Free Press* (where Parks lived later in life) and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* (Bates).

A total of 36 obituaries comprising about 32,000 words were analyzed. Emphasis was given to anecdotes, which the *Nieman Narrative Digest* defines as small stories that “often contribute to exposition and characterization digressively, rather than directly advancing the main line of action.”² They are the literary vehicle most often used in obituaries to tell stories about the newsmakers and the movement.

Results

The analysis found five themes that fit Hertog and McLeod’s (2001) parameters for framing symbolic, structured representations: (a) the importance of violence inflicted on Blacks, (b) the importance of the dutiful suffering endured by Blacks, (c) news media’s documentation of southern oppression, (d) the salience and valence of the early-1960s Martin Luther King Jr., and (e) the idealism of integration over Black nationalist goals. Interwoven is a “local harmony” that obituaries have with their readers while maintaining a national corroborated view of events (Fowler, 2007, p. 22). The newsmakers, listed chronologically by the year of their death, are treated as separate case studies to show how their obituaries rely on these themes to tell their personal stories and those of the movement.

James Farmer, 1920-1999

Farmer, who led the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), was the last of the “Big Four,” which had included King (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), Whitney Young (Urban League), and Roy Wilkins (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). The *Washington Post* explained their roles: “Mr. Farmer used to say that ‘the NAACP is the Justice Department, the Urban League is the State Department and we are the non-violent Marines’” (Smith, 1999). King’s SCLC is presumed to need no introduction.

The obituaries, which showed Farmer’s disappointment at fading from the spotlight after what the *Washington Post* called the “peak years” of the movement, struggled to place him at the movement’s most memorable episodes—many of which he helped organize but did not actually witness. Yet all the articles cite CORE’s organization of the Freedom Rides, to desegregate interstate bus travel, with almost immediate mention of the three rights workers killed in Mississippi.

According to the AP obituary, which ran in the Chicago and Atlanta papers, “Mr. Farmer helped recruit CORE members James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, all of whom were murdered in Mississippi in 1964 during the Freedom Rides. The slayings were the subject of the 1988 movie *Mississippi Burning*” (Tolme, 1999). The *New York Times* turned to Claude Sitton, its legendary southern reporter, for elaboration:

It was to CORE that the four Greensboro, N.C., students turned after staging the first in the series of sit-ins that swept the South in 1960. It was CORE that forced the issue of desegregation in interstate transportation with the Freedom Rides of 1961. It was CORE’s James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner—a black and two whites—who became the first fatalities of the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. (Severo, 1999)

Providing more details, the *Times* wrote that the three “were murdered by a gang of Klansmen and buried beneath an earthen dam” (Severo, 1999). The *Post* emphasized the “unforgettable images of the Freedom Rides” from Washington to Mississippi: “Television carried unforgettable images of a burning bus and of racist mobs attacking peaceful demonstrators. . . . Unable to remain on the sidelines, the Kennedy administration joined the struggle, and ultimately the infamous ‘white’ and ‘colored’ signs that labeled terminal facilities went down” (Smith, 1999).

The *Post* wrote that even though Farmer was a northerner, most of his work came on the “mean and dangerous streets of segregated America,” and the obituaries reported his narrow escape in a hearse from cattle-prod wielding police in Louisiana. The *New York Times* also reported that Farmer “risked his life in several demonstrations.” But it also included a rare reference to northern injustice not usually remembered from the March on Washington:

Mr. Farmer went to jail for “disturbing the peace” in Plaquemine [LA], and was behind bars on Aug. 28, 1963, the day that Dr. King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech as the climax of the March on Washington. Mr. Farmer sent his own speech . . . which was read by Floyd McKissick, an aide in CORE. “We will not stop,” Mr. Farmer wrote, “until the dogs stop biting us in the South and the rats stop biting us in the North.” (Severo, 1999)

All the obituaries contained a variation of a Farmer quotation about violence, either citing his autobiography or a 1991 interview: “If any man says that he had no fear in the action of the sixties, he is a liar. Or without imagination.”

His calling was traced to a childhood moment. Even though he is a professor’s son and “shielded from the worst aspects of racism,” the *New York*

Times recalled an incident when he was 3 or 4 and wanted a cold drink on a hot day:

He saw a white child go into a drug store, and it was not until he got home that his mother explained to him why he could not do the same thing. "Until then, I had not realized that I was colored" . . . "I had lived a sheltered life on campus. My mother fell across the bed and cried." Mr. Farmer said it did not make him bitter, but, over the years, he became "determined to do something about it." (Severo, 1999)

From the mid-1960s until his death, Farmer was disheartened by what he considered the movement's ill-advised shift to radicalism; the tone of his obituaries seems to sympathize with him and the fate of the freedom struggle. The *Post* wrote that "CORE, like other civil rights groups, was increasingly under the sway of younger Black separatists, and whites were being purged from CORE chapters despite its tradition of inclusion" (Smith, 1999). While the *New York Times* also pointed to his marriage to a White woman and an ill-fated alliance with Richard Nixon, the *Post* wrote that Mr. Farmer "believed his views cost him a place as a leading spokesman for African American concerns, but he never lost his faith in a color-blind society" (Smith, 1999).

Daisy Bates, 1914-1999

The Bates obituaries were especially elegiac because of bruising events of her life and the easily recalled imagery of the vitriol hurled at the Little Rock Nine. As head of the NAACP's Arkansas chapter, Bates organized the strategy and legal maneuverings to get the nine African Americans enrolled at Central High, then used her house as the base camp for the students and the federal troops who escorted them during their school day.

Accounts of Arkansas governor Orval Faubus's actions diverged in telling ways. According to the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Faubus was trying to maintain "peace" rather than disregarding federal law (Young, 1999). But the *Post* wrote in its lede that Bates "shepherded the black students known as the Little Rock Nine to integrate Central High School over the objection and obstruction of Gov. Orval E. Faubus and throngs of their white neighbors." The *New York Times* supplied an emotional summation of events:

Rocks were thrown through her window, a burning cross was placed on her roof and the newspaper published by her and her husband, L.C. Bates, was ultimately destroyed financially. But she nurtured the nine black children who faced vicious insults and physical intimidation. She encouraged them to be courageous, while striving to guard them against howling white mobs. (Martin, 1999)

The *Post* added, “Mrs. Bates would say in later years that any portrait of her as fearless was less than accurate. ‘Who said I wasn’t afraid? You acted because you believed, you were committed’” (Bernstein, 1999).

Scholars and journalists agree that the Little Rock integration was the made-for-television event that cemented the movement’s place on the nightly news (Rhodes, 2007; Roberts & Klibanoff, 2006). The *Post* noted that Bates “fed and prayed with the Little Rock teenagers and counseled them not to retaliate against the spitting and rock-throwing mob as the war between federal and state authority was captured on television” (Bernstein, 1999).

Not as publicized was the mechanism of Black self-defense (Walker, 2001). The *Los Angeles Times*, in a staff and wire account, quoted her autobiography: “She grew accustomed to seeing revolvers lying on tables inside her home ‘and shotguns, loaded with buckshot, standing ready near the doors’” (“Daisy Bates,” 1999). But the *Post* offered a redemptive anecdote:

For one period during the . . . integration crisis, Mrs. Bates carried a gun. One day, after she had received empty gun cartridges in an envelope, she fired a shot from her home—purposely missing. “They can’t make a murderer out of me.” (Bernstein, 1999)

The childhood trauma propelling Bates to action, told slightly differently depending on the publication, is rendered as a personal and racial tragedy. The Arkansas paper wrote that her “struggle for equal rights” began when she was a baby, after “her mother was raped and murdered by three white men. She was raised by adoptive parents” (Young, 1999). The *New York Times* cited her autobiography, where she wrote of

learning at 8 that her mother had been killed in a rape attempt by three white men. After she had heard rumors, her father told her the truth in simple and straightforward terms. “So happy once,” she wrote, “now I was like a little sapling which, after a violent storm, puts out only gnarled and twisted branches.” (Martin, 1999)

In the *Los Angeles Times*, she swore “to herself that she would ‘find the men who had done this horrible thing to my mother’ and ‘was instilled with a rage that would carry her through decades of struggle’” (“Daisy Bates,” 1999).

Most obituaries concluded with a Faubus quotation, signifying interracial reconciliation. “That there were those who disagreed and disagree, that the dream is not yet realized, need not detract from her or her accomplishments,” he said at a 1989 Bates benefit (Bernstein, 1999). But the AP let Bates, not Faubus, have the last word: “I told him once, ‘Yeah, we did have a good fight, didn’t we? But I won’” (Jefferson, 1999a).

Ossie Davis, 1917-2005

Civil rights and popular culture intersected on A1 with the obituaries of Ossie Davis, the writer, actor, and activist who spoke at the funerals of Malcolm X and King. "Davis was able to combine art and politics, advancing the causes that mattered to him while creating memorable characters on stage and in film and television," the *Chicago Tribune* wrote. "And he did it, from all accounts, with grace and humility" (Keller, 2005). *USA Today* let the actor-writer-activist say it in his own words: "The struggle and the arts are connected almost by definition" (Jones, 2005). The *Post* opened by declaring that his "uncompromising character was the hallmark of a distinguished career as an actor, playwright and director," and that he stood "at the vanguard of the nation's civil rights movement for more than five decades" (Schudel, 2005). Roger Ebert (2005), the esteemed *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic, called Davis "an actor and activist beloved and revered for his contributions to theater, film, television and the civil rights movement" who "combined militancy with grace and humor."

The *New York Times* declared him an "imposing, deep-voiced actor who with his wife and acting partner, Ruby Dee, helped widen horizons for Blacks on stage and screen while fighting zealously for civil rights from Washington to Hollywood" (Severo & Martin, 2005). That Davis acted literally until the day he died might explain the exuberance of these obituaries. Every paper referred to his work with film director Spike Lee, who cast him in six films including *Jungle Fever*, *Do the Right Thing*, and *School Daze* and launched him in a second career "at a time when most of his contemporaries were retiring" (Gillespie, 2005). Lee told Ebert (2005),

"They were strong and brave at a time when many Negro entertainers stood on the sidelines. Ruby and Ossie were by Malcolm's side, they were with Dr. King in Birmingham, Selma and the March on Washington, and never worried about the negative impact it might have on their careers."

There are different explanations for Davis's inspiration. *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* pointed to his hearing Marian Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after she had been banned from singing at Washington's Constitution Hall: "I was handed my spiritual assignment that night" (Schudel, 2005). The *Post* also noted that he had grown up in "a verbal culture in which he heard stories of African American life marked by humor, danger and sorrow. From an early age, Davis knew he wanted to be a writer and to improve the lot of his people" (Schudel, 2005).

The childhood anecdotes vary greatly. The *Atlanta Constitution-Journal*, emphasizing his local roots, wrote that Davis "never forgot his humble

beginnings as the son of a South Georgia railroad worker who could not write his name.” His name came about because “his mother’s pronunciation of his initials ‘R.C.’ was heard as ‘Ossie’” (Brock, 2005). Atlanta’s use of the passive voice contrasts with the *Los Angeles Times* version:

When his mother registered his birth, the county clerk misunderstood her and thought she said “Ossie” instead of “R.C.” . . . “The man was white. Mama and I were black and down in deepest Georgia. So the matter of identification was settled. Ossie it was, and Ossie it is till this very day.” (Woo, 2005a)

The *New York Times* wrote that one of Davis’s earliest memories

was bigots’ harassing his father because his occupation was considered a bit sophisticated for Blacks at that time. His father planned and supervised the building of railroads. A member of the Ku Klux Klan threatened to shoot his father “like a dog,” Ossie said that thinking about this inspired him to become a writer. (Severo & Martin, 2005)

Also note the disparity between the *Times* and *Atlanta* description of Davis’s father.

The *Los Angeles Times* cited another humiliating motivation. At age 6 or 7, Davis was held by two White policemen, who teased and harassed him before pouring syrup over his head. Young Ossie and the cops then shared a laugh: “They gave me several hunks of peanut brittle and let me go.” The incident “left a deep psychological scar that pervaded his sense of purpose when he grew into an artist and activist” (Woo, 2005a).

The obituaries all note that Davis spoke at Malcolm X’s funeral. The *Los Angeles Times* emphasized Malcolm’s shift toward racial tolerance and away from the Black Nation of Islam. Malcolm, who had “begun to soften his views of whites, was in the midst of a speech explaining his ideas for reaching out to the mainstream of the civil rights movement when he was shot dead by three gunmen, all Muslims” (Woo, 2005a). Davis’s characterization of Malcolm as a “black shining prince” “shook whites as well as blacks,” the *Los Angeles* paper declared, “and is cited today in discussions of the slain orator’s importance” (Woo, 2005a).

Rosa Parks, 1913-2005

Whether presented with gravitas (in New York, Washington, and Los Angeles) or as a long story with a happy ending (in Atlanta, Montgomery, and Detroit), the Parks obituaries each conveyed the sense of right triumphing over wrong. Montgomery’s 2,394-word obituary begins, “Rosa Parks, the world’s beloved

mother of the civil rights movement, is dead but her spirit lives on. The woman whose quiet strength broke the back of Jim Crow law will never be forgotten" (McGrew, 2005). And while obituaries across the country did not agree on who had "demanded" that Parks move from the middle to the back of the bus—the confrontational White bus driver sometimes identified as James Blake or an unnamed White male passenger—the bigger, true villain is the South.

Parks presumably did not suffer physically during her historic evening in jail, but these obituaries used different anecdotes from her life to remind readers of long-standing southern terrorism and oppression. Readers in Washington learned that Parks "recalled watching her grandfather guard the front door with a shotgun as the Ku Klux Klan paraded down their road" (Sullivan, 2005). Parks's grandmother, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, warned her that she would be lynched before turning 20 if she kept "standing up to whites" (Woo, 2005b). The *New York Times* reported that Parks's willful arrest was a "dangerous, even reckless move in 1950s Alabama," saying that she "perhaps risked even physical harm" (Shipp, 2005). The *Montgomery Advertiser* put it this way: "Young Rosa lived in a time when white men were men and black men were called 'boys' or worse" (McGrew, 2005).

Many papers joined the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in remembering that Parks became a test case over her husband's fears: "'Rosa, the white folks will kill you,' he said, but he later supported her actions" (Suggs & Bennett, 2005). It was her upstanding, dignified manner that put her in that position to make history: "Being a pillar of her community, Parks' reputation had been beyond reproach amongst those who knew her" (McGrew, 2005).

Parks's achievements, usually listed in the first sentence of her (and any) obituary, reveal how newspapers defined the civil rights movement. For *USA Today* and the AP, both known for their straightforward style, her refusal "launched a new era in the civil rights movement" (Vanden Brook, 2005) and "sparked the modern civil rights movement" (Fowler, 2005). The *Los Angeles Times* heralded "the Alabama seamstress whose simple act of defiance on a segregated Montgomery bus in 1955 stirred the nonviolent protests of the modern civil rights movement and catapulted an unknown minister named Martin Luther King Jr. to international prominence" (Woo, 2005b). The *Detroit Free Press* simply wrote, "When Rosa Parks refused to get up, an entire race of people began to stand up for their rights as human beings" (Spratling, 2005). In the *New York Times*, her "refusal to relinquish her seat to a white man" on a city bus "grew into a mythic event that helped touch off the civil rights movement of the 50's and 60's" (Shipp, 2005).

King is visible throughout. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that the 26-year-old newcomer to Montgomery was chosen to lead the group formed to

organize the boycott following Parks's arrest. Atlanta and other papers write about his "stirring speech" that kicked off the boycott. But King is noticeably absent from the Montgomery account, where local figures are prominent. The *Montgomery Advertiser* condensed the 13-month boycott and its ramifications to one paragraph:

Parks was later fined \$10, plus \$4 in court costs. The boycott drew to a close shortly after the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Browder v. Gayle*, ruled against the Montgomery ordinance that caused Parks' arrest, thus outlawing racial segregation on public transportation in the city and the South. (McGrew, 2005)

While the issue of moral standing was addressed, no newspaper explained the gender politics of the NAACP's focus on arrested women. Many obituaries mentioned the women previously arrested for not giving up their seats but deemed unsuitable by the NAACP for a test case, with the *Los Angeles Times* calling their pasts "unsavory." The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* concluded its obituary by comparing Parks to the 15-year-old Claudette Colvin.³ She

had been arrested and taken away in handcuffs for refusing to give up her seat on a bus in March 1955. Black leaders briefly considered her for the test case. Then they learned she was pregnant and unmarried. On December 1, 1955, Parks, a woman above moral reproach, stepped up and sat down. (Suggs & Bennett, 2005)

Odetta, 1930-2008

The *Post* and the *New York Times* rushed in shortened versions of their Odetta obituaries in the Wednesday editions after learning of her death Tuesday night. By Thursday morning, readers had a somewhat different picture. The most obvious change for *Post* readers was the headline: from "Odetta, 77, Sang the Soundtrack for the Civil Rights Movement" to "Odetta, Matriarch for Generation of Folk Singers." Initially, New York and Washington readers received a direct racial link between past and present when her manager told both papers that she had hoped to perform at the upcoming inauguration of president-elect Obama. The following day, the *Post* clarified that she had yet to be invited (though her desire is included a photograph caption). Still, her civil rights credentials were expanded in the later articles. Besides singing at the March on Washington, where King introduced her, she also "sang in front of President John F. Kennedy on the nationally televised civil rights special. . . . Alongside King, she marched for voting rights in 1965 in Selma, Alabama" (Weil & Bernstein, 2008b).

The *New York Times*, which made Odetta the first African American to be the subject of its obituary videos, referred to the movement's visual memory in relating how "Odetta's voice was an accompaniment to the black-and-white images of the freedom marchers who walked the roads of Alabama and Mississippi and the boulevards of Washington to end racial discrimination." The *New York Times* linked Odetta's music to another civil rights icon: "Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger led to the boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama, was once asked which songs meant the most to her. 'All of the songs Odetta sings,' she replied" (Weiner, 2008a, 2008b).

The New York paper emphasized her southern background, noting that she was born in Birmingham "in the depths of the Depression. The music of that time and place—particularly prison songs and work songs recorded in the fields of the Deep South—shaped her life" (Weiner, 2008a, 2008b). It added that her father died when she was young, and she and her mother moved to Los Angeles in 1937. This passage suggested a fatherless child, but the Los Angeles and Washington papers reported that her mother had remarried, she had taken her stepfather's name, and she had not lived in the South very long.

Other complications were found to dramatize her story. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that even though its city

wasn't as overtly racist as the Deep South, she suffered some of the same indignities that came with being black. "We lived within walking distance of Marshall High School," Odetta told the *Los Angeles Times* some years ago, "but they didn't let colored people go there, so we had to get on the bus and go to Belmont High School." (Lewis & Boehm, 2008)

Every article noted she had turned away from her classical training, with racism playing a part. A pioneer who had inspired Ossie Davis had served as a warning to Odetta. Even though her mother hoped she would follow "the racially groundbreaking career of opera singer Marian Anderson," Odetta recalled, "I was a smart kid and I knew that a black girl who was big like I was never going to be in the Metropolitan Opera" (Weil & Bernstein, 2008b).

According to the *New York Times*, she was transformed after discovering folk music in San Francisco while on tour, and traditional prison songs she learned "hit home the hardest and helped her come to terms with what she called the deep-seated hate and fury in her":

"As I did those songs, I could work on my hate and fury without being antisocial," she recalled. "Through those songs, I learned things about the history of black people in this country that the historians in school had not been willing to tell us about or had lied about." (Weiner, 2008b)

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that “her blues and spirituals led directly to her work for the civil rights movement. They were two rivers running together.” The AP reported that with an Odetta record, “listeners could close their eyes and imagine themselves hearing the sounds of spirituals and blues as they rang out from a weathered back porch or around a long-vanished campfire a century before” (Anderson, 2008).

Odetta’s historic recordings as a “Voice of the Civil Rights Movement,” as the *New York Times* headline put it, contrasted with the compositions of Nina Simone, another classically trained artist whose anger was expressed in her song “Mississippi Goddam.” In Simone’s *New York Times* obituary 5 years earlier, her career is said to suffer because “in the 1970’s her music fell out of fashion in the United States” (Keepnews, 2003). Odetta’s career trajectory is placed on a more politicized path:

Her fame hit a peak in 1963, when she marched with . . . Martin Luther King Jr. and performed for President . . . Kennedy. But with King’s assassination in 1968, much of the wind went out of the sails of the civil rights movement, and the songs of protest and resistance that had been the movement’s soundtrack began to fade. Odetta’s fame flagged for years thereafter. (Weiner, 2008b)

This authoritative denouement of Odetta’s popularity and the civil rights movement ignores Black pride and Black power and dismisses the protest music that evolved alongside the freedom struggle. Moreover, it showed how tone reinforces memory, with Simone’s verbal rejection of the movement’s successes seen as bitter, while the *New York Times*’s own conclusion in the context of Odetta was reported as unfortunate and uncontested truth.

Discussion

Even with an expected local flavor, these obituaries celebrate and mourn a narrow vision of a rights movement. At the same time, they view every aspect of the subjects’ lives through the lens of race: childhood, the mountain climb to achievement, the inevitable road to obscurity or disappointment. The civil rights movement remembered in the obituaries of Black leaders is merely, as Bond (2001) characterized it, “a morality play that pitted black saints against southern white sinners” (p. 35). In fact, Edy (2006) notes that one reason the past is so powerful is that collective memories achieve “a kind of perfection unattainable by either real life or narrative fiction”:

They resolve ambiguous events and complex characters into simple, moral tales populated by heroes, villains, and fools. . . . The work that was done to make the

story fit the facts and the facts fit the story fade from view; the collective memory appears whole, complete, true. (p. 204)

These obituaries illustrate her point. The civil rights movement, narratively constricted, is made whole and complete when the themes of these obituaries are plugged into Entman's (1993) definition of framing: the *problem* was violence/oppression against Blacks, who, led by King, respond with nonviolent protest and calls for racial harmony; the *diagnosis* was the harm (solely) by Jim Crow South; making *moral judgments* were the new media as eyewitnesses; and the *solution* was legislation that subdues a renegade region. This overarching frame, then, might remove civil rights achievements from the equation seeking to solve the persistence of the Black urban underclass. Fuller (2006) links "the widespread acceptance of racial reconciliation discourse" to a "hegemonic view that the civil rights movement succeeded in dismantling racist structures and in guaranteeing equality before the law" (p. 173).

But some obituaries have attempted to reshape the civil rights memory. While Fred Shuttlesworth's death in 2011 was an occasion to reiterate the violence inflicted upon him (and his courageous persistence), some of his obituaries made mention—however briefly—of his importance to the movement as a foil to King. On the surface, such an acknowledgment would seem to be far cry from the 1968 *New York Times* King obituary, which reported that the Montgomery bus boycott had begun "almost by accident" by a Negro seamstress who refused to relinquish her seat because "she was tired, she said. Her feet hurt from a day of shopping." The *Times* concluded that "from a protest begun over a Negro woman's tired feet Dr. King began his prolific career" (Schumach, 1968). More than 30 years later, the *Times* and other publications smashed the myth of a physically tired woman who changed the world:

The truth, as [Parks] later explained, was that she was tired of being humiliated, of having to adapt to the byzantine rules, some codified as law and others passed on as tradition, that reinforced the position of blacks as something less than full human beings. (Shipp, 2005)

Yet forgotten is the radical King portrayed in his *New York Times* obituary and who stressed: "For we know now, that it isn't enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn't have enough money to buy a hamburger?"

The stories told about the movement have consequences today. By "confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement" (Hall, 2005, p. 1234).

This study offers an initial approach to analyzing the news media's continuing relationship with the civil rights movement through obituaries. Its goal is for readers and journalists alike to abandon a memory of the civil rights movement in which narrative conflict centers on violence, suffering is more valued than strategy, and southern humiliation is more critical than urban misery. Civil rights movement discourse that equates a triumph over Jim Crow with the "finished" business of equal rights is more than a rhetorical issue. Rosa Lee, an addict immortalized in a *Washington Post* series, articulated that point in explaining why she had never voted: "I have seen too much and hasn't nothing changed. The only thing that's changed is we don't have to ride in the back of the bus" (Dash, 1997, p. 223).

Author's Note

This article is adapted from the author's master of arts thesis accepted by the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University, December 2009. One adaptation also was presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Mid-Winter Conference in Norman, Oklahoma, March 2012.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The author is a former *New York Times* editor but never worked on the obituary desk.
2. See the *Nieman Narrative Digest*, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/NiemanFoundation/ProgramsAndPublications/NarrativeJournalism.aspx>.
3. In 2009, Colvin became a national figure after Phillip Hoose won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature for *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

References

- Anderson, P. (2008, December 3). Folk, civil rights legend Odetta dies at 77. *USA Today*. Retrieved from <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com>
- Baker, H. A., Jr. (1994). Critical memory and the Black public sphere. *Public Culture*, 7, 3-33. doi:10.1215/08992363-7-1-3

- Baranauckas, C. (Ed.). (2006, September 25). Talk to the newsroom: Obituaries editor Bill McDonald. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Bates, A., Monroe, I., & Zuang, M. (2009, November 30). *The state of the American obituary*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, Medill School of Journalism.
- Bernstein, A. (1999, November 5). Daisy Bates dies; NAACP activist. *Washington Post*, p. B5.
- Bird, S. E., & Dardenne, R. W. (1988). Myth, chronicle, and story: Exploring the narrative qualities of news. In J. W. Carey (Ed.), *Media, myths and narratives: Television and the press* (pp. 67-86). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bond, J. (2001). Media and the movement: Looking back from the southern front. In B. Ward (Ed.), *Media, culture, and the modern African American freedom struggle* (pp. 17-40). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Branch, T. (1988). *Parting the waters: America in the King years 1954-63*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Brock, W. (2005, February 5). An appreciation: Ossie Davis: 1917-2005: Actor, activist, role model. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved from <http://www.lexisnexis.com>
- Bytheway, B., & Johnson, J. (1996). Valuing lives? Obituaries and the life course. *Mortality*, 1(2), 219-234.
- Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. (1997). *Spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Daisy, Bates; Civil rights activist advised students in 1957 Little Rock showdown. (1999, November 5). *Los Angeles Times*, p. A28.
- Dash, L. (1997). *Rosa Lee: A mother and her family in urban America*. New York, NY: Plume.
- Dopp, T. (2012, February 1). Christie apologizes after civil-rights remarks turn into weapon for foes. *Bloomberg News*. Retrieved from <http://www.bloomberg.com>
- Ebert, R. (2005, February 5). Remembering the man who did it all. *Chicago Sun-Times*, p. 4.
- Edy, J. A. (2006). *Troubled pasts: News and the collective memory of social unrest*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Entman, R. J. (1993). Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x
- Fowler, B. (2005, October 25). "Mother of the civil rights movement": She refused to give up her seat on bus. Associated Press. *Chicago Sun-Times*, p. 3.
- Fowler, B. (2007). *The obituary as collective memory*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fowler, B., & Bielsa, E. (2007). The lives we choose to remember: A quantitative analysis of newspaper obituaries. *Sociological Review*, 55(2), 203-225. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2007.00702.x
- Fuller, J. (2006). Debating the present through the past. In R. C. Romano & L. Raiford (Eds.), *The civil rights movement in American memory* (pp. 167-196). Athens: University of Georgia Press.

- Gillespie, E. G. (2005, February 5). Actor and activist: Ossie Davis 1917-2005: A man of principle; in his life and his art. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Retrieved from <http://www.lexisnexis.com>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hall, J. D. (2005). The long civil rights movement and the political uses of the past. *Journal of American History*, 91(4), 1233-1263.
- Hertog, J. K., & McLeod, D. M. (2001). A multiperspectival approach to framing analysis. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., & A. E. Grant (Eds.). *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world* (pp. 139-161). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hume, J. (2000). *Obituaries in American culture*. Oxford: University Press of Mississippi.
- Hume, J., & Arceneaux, N. (2008). Public memory, cultural legacy, and press coverage of the Juneteenth revival. *Journalism History*, 34(3), 155-163.
- Hume, J., & Bressers, B. (2009). Obituaries online: New connections with the living—and the dead. *Omega—Journal of Death and Dying*, 60(3), 255-271. doi:10.2190/OM.60.3.d
- Jackson, T. (2007). *From civil rights to human rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the struggle for economic justice*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jefferson, J. (1999a, November 4). Ark. civil rights leader Bates dies. *Associated Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1999>
- Jefferson, J. (1999b, November 5). Daisy Bates, 84, civil rights activist. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, p. 6F.
- Jones, S. (2005, February 5). Davis devoted his life and his work to civil rights. *USA Today*, p. 2D.
- Keepnews, P. (2003, April 22). Nina Simone, 70, soulful diva and voice of civil rights, dies. *New York Times*, p. B9.
- Keller, J. (2005, February 5). Ossie Davis; 1917-2005. *Chicago Tribune*, p. C1.
- King, M. L., Jr. (1969). Martin Luther King, Jr. writes about the birth of the Black power slogan. In R. L. Scott & W. Brockriede (Eds.), *Rhetoric of Black power* (pp. 25-64). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Kitch, C. (2007). Mourning “men joined in peril and purpose”: Working-class heroism in news repair of the Sago miners’ story. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24(2), 115-131. doi:10.1080/07393180701262727
- Kitch, C., & Hume, J. (2008). *Journalism in a culture of grief*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lewis, R., & Boehm, M. (2008, December 3). Odetta, 1930-2008; folk singer championed Black history, civil rights. *Los Angeles Times*, p. B6.
- Lippman, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. Retrieved from <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/lippman/contents.html>
- Martin, D. (1999, November 5). Daisy Bates, civil rights leader, dies at 84. *New York Times*, p. B11.

- McGrew, J. (2005, October 25). Parks' quiet courage helped change the world. *Montgomery Advertiser*, p. A2.
- Morgan, E. P. (2006). The good, the bad, and the forgotten: Media culture and public memory of the civil rights movement. In R. C. Romano & L. Raiford (Eds.), *The civil rights movement in American memory* (pp. 137-166). Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Payne, C. M. (2007). *I've got the light of freedom: The organizing tradition and the Mississippi freedom struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pew Research Center. (2007, November 13). *Optimism about Black progress declines*. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/634/black-public-opinion>
- Reese, S. D. (2001). Prologue. In S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., & A. E. Grant (Eds.), *Framing public life: Perspectives on media and our understanding of the social world* (pp. 7-31). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rhodes, J. (2007). *Framing the Black Panthers: The spectacular rise of a Black power icon*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Roberts, G., & Klibanoff, H. (2006). *The race beat: The press, the civil rights struggle and the awakening of a nation*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Romano, R. C., & Raiford, L. (Eds.). (2006). *The civil rights movement in American memory*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Scheufele, D. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, 9(1), 103-122. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02784.x
- Schudel, M. (2005, February 5). Distinguished actor's talents graced screen, political stage. *Washington Post*, pp. A1, A10.
- Schumach, M. (1968, April 5). Martin Luther King Jr.: Leader of millions in nonviolent drive for racial justice. *New York Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com
- Severo, R. (1999, July 10). James Farmer, civil rights giant in the 50's and 60's, is dead at 79. *New York Times*, pp. A1, C16.
- Severo, R., & Martin, D. (2005, February 5). Ossie Davis, actor, writer and eloquent champion of racial justice, is dead at 87. *New York Times*, p. A14.
- Shipp, E. R. (2005, October 25). Rosa Parks, 92, intrepid pioneer of civil rights movement, is dead. *New York Times*, pp. A1, C18.
- Simonetti, K. M. (2008). *Mediated memory: How three Milwaukee newspapers framed the 1967 Milwaukee Race Riots in contemporary and retrospective coverage* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/>
- Smith, J. Y. (1999, July 10). Civil rights leader James Farmer dies. *Washington Post*, pp. A1, A10.
- Southern Poverty Law Center. (2011, September 28). *SPLC study finds that more than half of states fail at teaching the civil rights movement*. Retrieved from <http://www.splcenter.org>
- Spratling, C. (2005, October 25). Good-bye, Mrs. Parks. *Detroit Free Press*. Retrieved from the *Detroit Free Press* internal media library.
- Stark, N. (2006). *Life after death: The art of the obituary*. Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press.

- Suggs, E., & Bennett, T. (2005, October 25). Heroine of civil rights: Rosa Parks: 1913-2005. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, p. 8A.
- Sullivan, P. (2005, October 25). Bus ride shook a nation's conscience. *Washington Post*, pp. A1, A12.
- Tolme, P. (1999, July 10). Civil rights leader James Farmer dies. *Associated Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.lexisnexus.com>
- Vanden Brook, T. (2005, October 25). Parks' courage changed nation. *USA Today*, p. 3A.
- Von Hoffman, N. (1964). *Mississippi notebook*. New York, NY: David White.
- Walker, J. (2001). A media-made movement? Black violence and nonviolence in the historiography of the civil rights movement. In B. Ward (Ed.), *Media, culture, and the modern African American freedom struggle* (pp. 40-66). Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Ward, B. (Ed.). (2001). *Media, culture, and the modern African American freedom struggle*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Weil, M., & Bernstein, A. (2008a, December 3). Odetta, 77; sang the soundtrack for the civil rights movement. *Washington Post*, p. A8.
- Weil, M., & Bernstein, A. (2008b, December 4). Odetta; matriarch for generation of folk singers. *Washington Post*, p. B6.
- Weiner, T. (2008a, December 3). Odetta, 77, a voice of the civil rights movement, dies. *New York Times*, p. A24.
- Weiner, T. (2008b, December 4). Odetta, civil rights voice, dies at 77. *New York Times*, p. B12.
- Woo, E. (2005a, February 5). Ossie Davis, 1917-2005; Actor played a powerful role in civil rights gains. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. A1, A21.
- Woo, E. (2005b, October 25). Rosa Parks: 1913-2005; She set wheels of justice in motion. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. A1, A12, A13.
- Young, K. (1999, November 5). Civil rights champion Daisy Bates dies. *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://www.lexisnexus.com>

Author Biography

Kathleen McElroy, a former journalist, is a second-year doctoral student in the School of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, focusing on the intersection of race and media.